

Musical Treasure Chest #2



I think opera was on my mind this week, perhaps because I listened to the wonderful MET broadcast last Saturday of *Tosca* (Anne Netrebko, Yusef Eyvazov, and Michael Volle—simply a great cast), and perhaps as well because we are getting ready for our livestream this Sunday with a program of French opera inspired repertory. As I considered what music I want to share with you, I thought about how opera was not always a favorite genre for me. Even though I listened to the MET broadcasts with my dad when I was little, hearing opera casually at home, when you can sort of tune in and out (and talk and do other activities) is not the same as sitting in a performance, where your attention is uninterrupted.

The first time I attended a live opera was after my senior year of high school. I had been accepted into a summer music intensive program called *Congress of Strings*, which was sponsored by the American Federation of Musicians. There were two “camps”—one on the west coast for people west of Chicago, and one at the University of Cincinnati for the east coast students. The program was for advanced high school and college students and featured some of the great string players of the time as coaches, teachers and conductors. For eight weeks, we rehearsed in a string orchestra for 5-6 hours per day, took private lessons, master classes, played

chamber music and gave weekly performances. In the evenings we attended professional concerts. Cincinnati's first-rate opera company has year round productions, including a summer season. Our first opera was Verdi's *Macbeth*. I was excited, this was my first experience, we had great box seats, and I was prepared to be blown away. However, I am embarrassed to say I did not leave the evening an opera convert. I paid close attention to the entire production, but for my concept of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* somehow Verdi's music didn't seem to match, I didn't understand how the music related to the drama. I was disappointed. Our next opera was Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. I had a more pleasant experience with this, but still was not totally won over. The third opera was *La Boheme*. I was engrossed from the first moments of the score; I laughed, I swooned, I cried, I marveled at the beauty of the piece. This was the "gateway" opera for me, from this point on I was an operaphile. I liked *Boheme* so much that my college roommates gave me the piano score as a Christmas present. By the way, I now am a fan of Verdi's *Macbeth* too.

So for this Musical Treasure Chest I picked two opera selections and one *lied* that I adore and never tire of hearing. The first is from **Massenet's 1887 opera *Werther***. The entire opera is a masterpiece--I first heard it at Glimmerglass Opera (where I play in the violin section of the orchestra, a job I absolutely love)—but one of my favorite moments is the letter scene in the opening of the third act. It's a brilliant marriage of music and drama, a passionate aria by Charlotte as she muses over a letter from Werther. Massenet orchestrated this scene stunningly, using an alto saxophone paired with winds and strings to give a most unusual and effective timbre that elevates the tension and passion of the music. Listen to how beautifully it works with the vocal line. I selected a gorgeous production with Joyce DiDonato and the Royal Opera House for you to listen to.

Massenet Letter Aria

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJns_fii4Rk

My second selection is the trio (Hab mir's gelobt) from **Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier***. If there are certain stars that twinkle more brightly in the musical firmament, this trio is one of them. It is exquisite, sublime, and utterly transporting. When I turned 40, my husband took me to Vienna as my present. Vienna is a fairy

tale city for me, the home of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Mahler, and the list goes on. We had lots of adventures on this trip, perhaps I will share some in a latter Musical Treasure, but one of the highlights was a visit to the Haus der Musik. This incredible museum features a whole floor devoted to the history of the Vienna Philharmonic. I couldn't read enough about them (my husband finished all four floors of the museum, while I was still on the first reading all of the material on the orchestra). I highly recommend this place if you are in Vienna. After leaving the museum we had tickets to see *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Wiener Staatsoper—the Vienna Philharmonic is their “pit” orchestra. With seats in the fourth row I had a bird's eye view of the orchestra. The Strauss score is an orchestral *tour de force* with many astonishingly difficult string solos. I don't know how much of the opera I actually saw because my focus was on the orchestra and their incredible playing. But as riveted as I was, this glorious vocal trio pulled my attention to the stage. I have given you one of the great Marschallin interpretators: Kiri te Kanawa, with Barbara Bonney and Aage Hoagland. In the pit is Sir Georg Solti, whose pacing of the score is superb.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnRhDsqx5Zs>

The final selection is really at the opposite end of the musical spectrum: a selection from **Robert Schumann's *Liederkreis, op. 39***. This 1840 song cycle by Robert Schumann is one of my favorites and within this 12 song setting of Eichendorff's poems, no 5 *Mondnacht* is particularly special. Schumann's delicate triplets in the opening, the way the melody shimmers above the piano line, it's so poignant, so beautiful. I have given you the poem as well. I don't have a special story for this piece and am not sure when I became aware of it, I just love it. This link features the great German baritone Dietrich Fischer Dieskau.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBGyJvHe0kc>

It was as if the heavens
Had silently kissed the earth,
So that in a shower of blossoms
She must only dream of him.

The breeze wafted through the fields,

The ears of corn waved gently,
The forests rustled faintly,
So sparkling clear was the night.

And my soul stretched
its wings out far,
Flew through the hushed lands,
as if it were flying home.